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SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR SY LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: OPPOSITION MARADA LEADER CALLS FOR
DIRECT TALKS WITH ISRAEL

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Christian opposition Marada leader Suleiman Franjieh suggested on October 27 that direct talks between Lebanon (partnered with Syria) and Israel would lead to resolution of the issue of Hizballah arms, and that Lebanese-Syrian collaboration was necessary for border security. Stressing the need for Christian unity, Franjieh opposed the formation of a third Christian bloc under President Michel Sleiman, and blamed Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea for failed reconciliation efforts between his party and Marada. Franjieh defended his opposition Christian ally Michel Aoun's recent trip to Iran, as well as Hizballah's actions in May, and claimed his alliance with Hizballah and Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement was the result of Sunni failure to allow real Christian representation. At a dinner the same evening, March 14 members debated the pros and cons of Sleiman forming a third Christian bloc. Neither Franjieh nor the March 14 members were in favor of expanding the National Dialogue. End summary.

¶2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief and Senior LES Political Advisor, met with opposition Marada leader Suleiman Franjieh at his home in Bneshay on October 27. Franjieh advisors Raymond Araygi and Richard Haykal (AmCit) also attended the one and a half hour meeting.

FRANJIEH ADVOCATES
DIRECT TALKS WITH ISRAEL

¶3. (C) Franjieh, who freely admits to his friendship with the Asad family in Syria (and strongly denies any connection to Syrian intelligence), claimed President Asad had asked President Sleiman to open direct negotiations with Israel during the latter's August 13-14 visit to Damascus. Syria and Lebanon shared the same interests in reaching a peace agreement with Israel, he argued, adding that this would get rid of the Hizballah problem. Now that the Lebanese prisoners held in Israel have been released, once Shebaa Farms and Israeli violations of Lebanese sovereignty were resolved, Lebanon would have no more issues with Syria. Instead, he complained, March 14 refuses direct negotiations

because, blinded by their hatred of Syria, they prefer "no peace, no war" status quo.

...AND BORDER SECURITY
COLLABORATION WITH SYRIA

¶14. (C) Franjieh welcomed recent steps between Syria and Lebanon to establish diplomatic relations, claiming this was something President Asad had advocated even as Syrian troops were pulling out of Lebanon in 2005. However, Asad was insulted so much by the Lebanese and others that he quickly abandoned the idea.

¶15. (C) The U.S. and Europe had miscalculated Bashar, he continued, believing that he was weak and his regime would easily crumble under pressure. A better approach would be to befriend the Syrians, he suggested, claiming they would give "almost everything" to their friends, but nothing under pressure.

¶16. (C) Franjieh dismissed the Syrian troop deployment on Lebanon's northern border as "nothing special." Joking that if the Syrians wanted to invade Lebanon, they would ask the U.S. and not Lebanon for permission, Franjieh noted that Asad knew he would create big problems with his friends if he did. On the other hand, Franjieh believed that Salafists in northern Lebanon did present a threat to Syria, and "his own personal opinion" was that the Syrian troop presence could intimidate these groups. Ambassador reiterated U.S. insistence that Syria respect Lebanon's independence and

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sovereignty.

¶17. (C) While agreeing that the Salafist threat in Tripoli probably was exaggerated, Franjieh nevertheless warned that the area was "fertile ground" for terrorists, including Al-Qaeda and everyone else. These groups did not present a military threat to Syria, but they did represent a security threat, even more to Syria than to Lebanon, he said. Because of the difficulties in policing 250 km of common borders, Lebanon needed to collaborate with Syria under some sort of security arrangement.

¶18. (C) According to Franjieh, Defense Minister Elias Murr wanted to go to Damascus to meet with Asad's brother Maher, but had been refused by the Syrians, who told him he could only meet with his Syrian Defense Minister counterpart. Franjieh claimed the Syrians then asked Hizballah to ask Aoun whether he would mind if Michel Murr, Elias' father, made the trip instead. Aoun himself had no relationship with the Syrians, Franjieh insisted, although they respected him because he had never treated them badly, even after they ousted him from power.

¶19. (C) Note: The Ambassador asked Elias Murr the following day about rumors that he might visit Damascus. Murr downplayed the possibility, while noting that border security talks between the two countries could at some point involve the two Ministers of Defense. Elias blames Syria for the 2005 assassination attempt against him, thereby making him persona non grata in Syria. His father, on the other hand, is more acceptable to the Asad regime, but the Syrians presumably would not want to risk alienating Aoun by giving the impression that they were supporting the Murr family, given the Murr-Aoun electoral confrontation in the Metn. End note.

"WE MUST UNIFY THE CHRISTIANS"

¶10. (C) Franjieh, commenting that everything in Lebanon was already focused on the Spring 2009 elections, said that the only real contests would be in the Christian areas. Franjieh denied any differences between his Marada party and Aoun's

Free Patriotic Movement, explaining that, at the end of the day, his goal was to work for his community. Because Aoun represented the majority of Lebanon's Christians, he needed to work with him as well, since together the opposition Christians held 22 seats in parliament. (Note: Marada holds none of those seats. End note.)

¶11. (C) Franjieh opposed the formation of a third Christian party under President Sleiman, stating that two to three Christian groups would be a "disaster" for the Christians. Sleiman would be unable to play the role of mediator, and, if his group lost, he would lose Christian support, while if it won, he would create adversaries within the Christian community. "We must unify the Christians," he said.

DEFENSIVE OF AOUN

¶12. (C) Franjieh downplayed Aoun's recent trip to Tehran, which occurred at the same time Sleiman was visiting Saudi Arabia, saying the President's trip was in his capacity as the Christian president of Lebanon, while Aoun was traveling in his capacity as a Christian leader. Each has his own role to play, he said; there's enough work for both. He denied that Aoun's trip had caused him to lose Christian support, explaining that opposition Christians were "either with us or they're not," and that in any case, Geagea's trip to Egypt during the same period had provided Aoun any political cover he needed for Christian leaders visiting Muslim countries in the region. Furthermore, any supporters Aoun might have lost by going to Iran had probably already deserted him when he signed the 2006 MOU with Hizballah.

¶13. (C) Franjieh did not agree with those who interpreted Deputy PM Abou Jamra's demands for powers as an attempt to win support for Aoun or distract from Aoun's Iran trip.

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Instead, he attributed the antics to Abou Jamra's personality, noting that even Aoun had warned that the Deputy PM would be a trouble-maker. Nevertheless, Franjieh said, PM Siniora did not have the right to deny Abou Jamra an office at the Grand Serail. He predicted that the Cabinet would somehow find a way to deal with the issue, but without actually resolving it.

¶14. (C) The Ambassador asked what Zghorta Christians had in common with Aoun's ally, Hizballah, especially after Hizballah killed fellow Lebanese during the May crisis. Franjieh, claiming he opposed any use of Hizballah's arms within the country, nevertheless justified its actions in May, arguing that its existence was threatened by the government's attempt to close down its telecommunications network. The government was testing the waters, he explained, to see how Hizballah would react. Moreover, he claimed outrageously, someone had convinced Saad that this would provoke a short civil war that would result in international intervention that would bring the international community back on board with March 14.

¶15. (C) The opposition Christians, including Aoun, had tried to ally with the Sunnis in the past, he continued, but were frustrated by Saad's efforts to impose his own Christian candidates (e.g., Ghattas Khoury). Furthermore, the Sunnis accused Marada and others of killing former PM Hariri and of being Syrians and Iranians, which ultimately pushed them toward Hizballah. Franjieh claimed he had not even met Hizballah SYG Nasrallah until one month before the 2005 elections, but noted that both sides were united in their support to create a new electoral law along the lines of the 1960 law, which was based on smaller "qada" that would benefit Marada by removing the ability of Sunni voters to decide candidates in Christian areas.

GEAGEA NOT SINCERE
ABOUT RECONCILIATION

¶16. (C) Franjieh said Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea (whom Franjieh blames for his role in the 1978 Ehden massacre that killed Franjieh's parents and sister and some 26 others) lacked the "good will" to conclude a real reconciliation. He believed Geagea's apparent change of heart, after 30 years of denying his involvement and repeatedly refusing Franjieh's overtures, was for political gain, to earn favor with his voters. Geagea needed reconciliation, Franjieh argued, "and I'm not offering him any gifts." Franjieh claimed he was ready to close the file on the issue, but only if there were "sincere" and "personal" efforts by Geagea, rather than the "artificial" and "political" reconciliation Geagea was offering to date. Haykal criticized what he viewed as U.S. hypocrisy in condemning Samir Qantar's murder of a four year old Israeli girl, but supporting Geagea, who was responsible for the death of Franjieh's toddler sister.

¶17. (C) Franjieh said polls showed over 60 percent of the Christian community did not really want reconciliation. He also noted that Patriarch Sfeir had sent Bishop Boulos Matar to him to convince him not to seek reconciliation under the auspices of President Sleiman. (Note: Franjieh, who has been publicly critical of the Patriarch over the past year, has been trying to sideline his role in Christian reconciliation efforts. End note.)

2009 ELECTIONS

¶18. (C) Franjieh predicted that, for technical reasons, the 2009 parliamentary elections would be held over two days rather than one. The army cannot deploy all of its troops at once, he said, as this would leave security vacuums that people would take advantage of. He appeared to welcome the presence of international observers, claiming that one such observer during the 2005 elections had told him Saad Hariri's Future Movement had falsified results. Noting that his political adversaries claimed to be spending \$50 - 100,000 a month in his Zghorta district, Franjieh said there was no

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evidence of any of this money coming in, adding that in any case, Saudi money cancels Iranian money.

NATIONAL DIALOGUE: BICKERING OVER NUMBERS

¶19. (C) The Ambassador, noting that some in the opposition were demanding that the National Dialogue be expanded to include two more each from the majority and opposition, presumably giving Franjieh a seat at the table, asked his views on enlargement. Franjieh said that the criteria for the current formula of 14 representatives had changed since the 2006 Dialogue; both Safadi and Gemayel had lost MPs (Note: The latter due to two assassinations. End note), while Michel Murr had switched sides in the interim. The numbers should be changed in principle because the criteria for selecting the original 14 representatives had changed, he argued. But he labeled talk of increasing or decreasing the numbers "political bickering" that signaled that the parties in reality were not interested in dialogue. He advocated a 7/7 split between the majority and opposition, but noted that, since decisions were made by unanimity, one vote was all that was needed for a veto. All that said, Franjieh claimed to be satisfied with Marada's representation through Michel Aoun.

MARCH 14 ON THIRD CHRISTIAN BLOC, NATIONAL DIALOGUE

¶20. (C) At a dinner later that day with members of the March 14 Secretariat (SYG Fares Suaid, Hariri advisor Ghattas

Khoury, Michel Mecattaf, Samir Franjieh, and independent Christian MP Mansour Ilbon), Suaid told Ambassador, DCM, and PolCouns that March 14 would welcome President Sleiman's formation of a third Christian bloc. Such an initiative would provide the means to confront Aoun, especially in the Christian districts of Jbeil, Ksrawan, Metn, and Baabda. However, he believed Sleiman was not yet ready to confront Aoun, and that he would only do so if he had the backing of Hizballah and Syria. Furthermore, Suaid acknowledged that March 14 Christian candidates could lose votes to Sleiman. (Note: Ilbon, a pro-Sleiman candidate from Kswaran, where Aoun now holds all five seats, is a key figure in this debate. Ilbon has been reluctant to ally with March 14 because of his constituency's deep dislike for Samir Geagea. His presence at the dinner, however, suggests that, while his preference would be to run on a Sleiman-backed ticket, he leanings are more pro-March 14 than pro-Aoun. End note.)

¶21. (C) For his part, Ghattas Khoury said Sleiman should be encouraged to form his own parliamentary bloc, which would attract Christian voters who were not ready to vote for March 14 but were opposed to Aoun. Khoury said Aoun's popularity was declining, and he viewed Aoun's statement that he was ready to share some of his FPM seats with Sleiman as a sign of weakness. Khoury believed Sleiman was more pro-March 14 than pro-opposition, as demonstrated by his strong public statements of support for the Special Tribunal, which could make him a target for assassination. March 14's strategy, he said, should be to win a simple majority in the next parliament (65 out of 128 MPs leaving Sleiman, whom he expected would win seven or eight seats, no choice but to side with March 14.

¶22. (C) Khoury also said March 14 was "firm" in its opposition to expanding the dialogue. The criteria for selecting the participants had not changed, he said, and was confirmed at Doha. Any changes would have to come after the parliamentary elections. Khoury was skeptical that the Dialogue would make any progress on the defense strategy before the elections.

SISON